



Small Wars 2.0: A Working Paper on Land Force Planning After Iraq and Afghanistan

by Nathan Freier

Introduction: What Now?

Given the experience of the last decade, policymakers are certain to prefer managing future terrorist threats with the fusion of intelligence, law enforcement, and special military operations and not via resource-intensive counterinsurgency (COIN). Atomized Islamic extremist threats will persist for sure. However, their continued existence by itself is insufficient justification for maintaining large standing general purpose land forces. The prospect of large-scale conventional warfights with competitor states too appears to be of little use to senior decision makers for determining the most demanding future landpower requirements.

This all is becoming clear at a time when both the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and looming fiscal challenges are severely limiting DoD's decision space. With a great deal yet to be determined about the future of land forces, the aforementioned trends have already had a significant impact on the Army and Marine Corps.¹ And, absent a compelling narrative for the land components beyond the current wars, I believe that growing senior-level skepticism about future irregular warfights and continued defense austerity will ultimately negatively impact their size and capability. Much deeper, astrategic force structure changes — in addition to those already announced — may follow.

DoD's under-preparedness for the previous decade is often pinned on a failure of imagination. Sadly, the current wars may have dulled collective imagination still more. Going forward, careful consideration of the widest possible unconventional contingency set, however, may help DoD avert imprudent land force changes. This new, broader contingency set should move conceptually beyond what was once called the War on Terror (WoT) and into functional space that, as a consequence of the immediate burdens of the last nine years, remains undervalued in national-level strategic planning. This wider contingency space should be defined by threats that cannot be ignored given the interests at stake but also can only be addressed adequately

through the discriminating application of land forces. With detailed consideration, this new demand set likely provides ample justification for maintaining robust joint land forces focused on rapid forcible entry, sustained ground combat, and limited opposed stabilization.

For the most part, challenges falling into this category are strategically disruptive "small wars" in important states and regions.² The new wider challenge set includes terrorists but does not overvalue the large-scale use of Army and Marine general purpose forces (GPF) to hunt them down. It sees response to succession crises; civil wars or insurrections; lawlessness, criminality, and criminal sanctuary; loss of control over or use of dangerous military capabilities or weapons of mass destruction; and natural or human catastrophe as more useful land force planning models than classical insurgency, terrorism, or major theater war. In essence, it focuses on consequential threats of disorder that cannot be managed or contained adequately without timely employment of the right expeditionary land forces.

Most defense experts accept small wars as the likeliest *raison d'être* of the Army and Marine Corps going forward. However, the current default setting for future small wars is most often reflexively defined as some combination of the operations described in FM 3-07 Stability Operations (STABOPS) and FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency.³ Too often this means that future wars look — not unsurprisingly — like current wars.

A more comprehensive risk- and resource-informed assessment of future demands is in order. I argue here that any assessment of future small wars requirements that does not account for the certainty of declining resources; fails to question conventional wisdom about COIN and STABOPS; or, finally, ignores the likelihood of significant policy-level constraints emerging from Iraq and Afghanistan will not end with the right force structure or employment concepts. The worst outcomes in this regard would, of course, undermine future readiness.

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As the department's senior leaders visualize the future land force, three realities are relatively certain. First, the force will be smaller — perhaps, significantly so. Second, tomorrow's landpower demands will not look like those of either today or yesterday. And, finally, third, national leaders will hesitate when faced with future interventions that look — in cost and scale — like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, they are likely to drive down expectations about outcomes and, as a consequence, limit investment of blood, treasure, and time. How the land services and special operations forces (SoF) account for these factors may determine how well they navigate senior-level defense decision making on the future joint force.

QDR and More of the Same

The land components already have one strike against them. From a future concept perspective, the Army and Marine Corps did not actually weather February's Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) as well as their air and naval counterparts. QDR set a clear azimuth for the Navy and Air Force. It charged them to develop a comprehensive "Air-Sea Battle" (ASB) concept for anti-access environments.⁴ By contrast, the best mission the Department of Defense (DoD) could muster for the Army and Marine Corps was essentially 'more of the same.' This implies that, in the eyes of defense leadership, the land components are forces of today, whereas air, sea, space, and cyber power constitute forces of tomorrow — an unenviable position if you are an Army or Marine senior leader.⁵

After nearly ten years of continuous irregular combat, the future land force question could use more inspiration. Without it, the Pentagon itself will become an active theater of war as defense austerity shifts into high gear. Land force futures will be the contested ground. And, absent a compelling future narrative, land forces will be the principal source of future defense savings. Given the nation's continuing economic woes, prudent post-war force reductions are in order. Yet, these reductions should not occur without an adequate risk-informed assessment of future worst-case need.

In this regard, the critical question left unanswered by the last defense review was "what is the land components' unique contribution to national defense in an era of expanding defense missions, fewer resources, and widespread skepticism about repeating the experience of our most recent wars?" The 1990's were dominated by abstract scenarios about two large-scale conventional conflicts. The last decade, on the other hand, provided defense planners with concrete experience from which to draw lessons. Senior defense leaders now need to craft a new land force vision that blends abstract prediction with recent

experience, providing the Army and Marine Corps specifically with a clear, risk-adjusted mandate for the future.

Toward this end, I suggest that defense leaders first charter the land components as the nation's principal hedge against consequential foreign disorder. This is already far closer to their historical role than they prefer to acknowledge. To be sure, classical insurgency falls in the category "consequential foreign disorder." However, in spite of the economy of scale that has grown up around COIN in the last ten years, it is not necessarily the likeliest source of future trouble.

Next, senior defense leaders should examine military responses to future small wars with renewed realism and, thus, within the context of assumed war weariness on main street and flat or declining defense resources flowing from Washington. As a consequence, a good future land force model might size, shape, and posture the Army and Marine Corps for forced intervention into internal conflicts occurring within relatively large and/or important states but in pursuit of much more circumspect objectives than those associated with Iraq in particular. This acknowledges that the next generation of strategic decision makers will likely see Iraq and Afghanistan as cost-prohibitive endeavors while, at the same time, recognizing that the capacity for forcible intervention and sustained combat and stability operations are hallmarks of continued great power status.⁶

In the end, if as I have argued above, land forces will be getting smaller, they are less in danger of becoming hollow than they are of being dead wrong about their future mission set. Thus, the last decade might well be remembered over the course of the next two as one of over-correction, under-estimation, wishful thinking, and institutional short-sightedness.

The COIN of the Realm: Building Imbalance in Post-9/11 Strategic Planning

On the subject of over-correction; in the last nine years, DoD as an enterprise has reflexively over-corrected for a specific brand of small war — i.e., neo-classical COIN in the Near East and South Asia. This move relies on four questionable assumptions: 1) terrorism is the most compelling threat-focus for DoD's general purpose land forces; 2) comprehensive COIN is the only Defense antidote for it; 3) no consequential unconventional threats will emerge outside the Central Command area of responsibility; and 4) competent, capable, and friendly partners will always be waiting for U.S. forces dockside or planeside in future contingencies. A key risk going forward is that all of this proves wrong.

What if, for example, the terrorist threat remains at the level it is today — lethal mischief; necessitating unrelenting low-visibility pressure to keep it so but certainly not mass? What if the few U.S. partners that may face a classical insurgency exhibit little interest in large-scale commitment of U.S. combatants or trainers? What if the sources of future consequential, irregular land-based threats transcend the Middle East and South Asia and involve Latin America, Northeast Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Pacific Rim as well? Finally, what if the United States faces a significant threat to foreign interests under conditions where indigenous political authorities have lost complete control over outcomes and, therefore, extend none of the benefits associated with credible partnership? Worse still, what if this occurs in a state where U.S. intervention is unavoidable and where both the population and remnants of the former regime are hostile?

Yet another example of potential over-correction comes in the area of stabilization and reconstruction. While the United States government (USG) has made significant strides adjusting to the demands of comprehensive stabilization, reconstruction, and state-building — and has developed equally comprehensive doctrine for the complete resuscitation of crippled states, future decision makers and strategists are certain to be less ambitious in the case of the next regime collapse. There is clearly emerging cognitive dissonance between what we now know to be the requisite (and enormous) investment in blood and treasure needed to put a modest-sized state of 25-30 million people tenuously back on its feet and what the risk and cost tolerance of American officials are as a result. Repeating commitments that match Iraq and Afghanistan in scale and duration hazard prohibitive costs for a war-weary nation. Further still, they promise to fix finite U.S. land forces strategically in a single theater, severely limiting broader global freedom of action.

Thus, increasingly the FM 3-07/FM 3-24 blueprint will instead have to be a menu; where minimum essential outcomes are pursued through selective and limited stabilization and reconstruction efforts in pursuit of ‘good enough’ but certainly not ideal outcomes. The next failed or failing foreign regime will get something less than ‘all in’ from the USG. And, sooner rather than later, American decision makers will also recognize that stand-by civil architecture for no-notice deployment on large-scale, long-duration, STABOPS is an expensive luxury.⁷

The idea of raising more civilian USG capacity to fuel a more vigorous whole-of-government approach to foreign contingency operations has long been a hobby horse to the Washington conference set. However, it is an aspiration unlikely to be recognized any time soon under tight fiscal circumstances. If DoD’s budget is flattening and ultimately falling, the Depart-

ment of State’s (DoS) resources are not likely to rise. Though DoS seems to have strengthened the hand of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) by making it a proper bureau (Conflict and Stabilization Operations) within the department and thus increasing the prospect of greater civil capacity for non-military contingency responsibilities, an assessment of the recent Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) hints otherwise, observing:

The S/CRS budget has been severely cut in 2011. Will the Secretary be able to ensure sufficient funding for the vision? Will there be support for civilian capacity absent the immediate demand to send personnel to the front lines with the military? The reference to pooled funds (from State, DoD, and USAID) for these operations suggests an ill-advised strategy of giving up some policy leadership in order to rely on DoD’s ability to get resources.⁸

For the time being then, the military — and specifically land forces — need to accept that they will continue leading any significant stabilization efforts, regardless of how appropriate or not the uniformed military is to a given set of stabilization tasks. This will create another set of uncomfortable choices; this time within the land services. STABOPS purists will certainly want more specialists — counterinsurgents, trainers, civil affairs experts, etc. That may be ideal. However, senior land force leaders may have to opt for ‘gifted generalists’ in a bid to effectively cover down on all possible contingencies. In truth, there will be fewer soldiers and fewer civilians available for future STABOPS. This invariably pushes armed interventions in a very specific direction — i.e., more discrimination in mission selection and pursuit of less ambitious outcomes in mission conduct.

With respect to under-estimation; given the diffusion of threat capabilities and the spectrum of all possible small wars, DoD may well seriously misjudge the intensity of its more unavoidable, unconventional future land contingencies. To date, the high-end asymmetric threat (HEAT) — i.e., neo-“traditional” challengers like China, North Korea, Iran, etc — seems to dominate the ‘high-intensity’ headlines.⁹ This is predictable, of course, as high-intensity and innovative (but still traditional) military methods and capabilities are habitually linked in defense planning.

The current ‘more of the same’ narrative implies that U.S. land forces will operate with relative impunity and freedom of action in what was once described as the “low-intensity conflict” sphere, chasing terrorists and insurgents around ungoverned and under-governed territory while simultaneously building

indigenous security forces to take over the hunt. This by no means underplays the physical threats to individual service members in these environments and acknowledges that U.S. forces will need to protect themselves with specialized capabilities to be sure. However, it also assumes that circumstances will replicate Iraq and Afghanistan and future unconventional opponents will adhere to the al Qaeda, Iraqi insurgent, and Taliban playbooks. If so, the logic follows that U.S. forces have already adjusted concepts, training, and material adequately for all future threats and, therefore, will automatically succeed. This is a risky proposition as well.

While the United States has become accustomed to ‘conflict in the round’ over the last nine plus years, it has not yet done so at its highest level of intensity - think - collapse of a large, important state; civil war involving WMD; or violent devolution of a relatively sophisticated military. For U.S. decision makers, this type of problem will be too important to ignore and too big to solve. The first imperative under these circumstances involves aggressively pursuing minimum essential security outcomes even before contemplating (or ever) moving on to more comprehensive, classical Phase IV/Phase V state-building efforts.¹⁰

It is, for example, not fantastical to note that even those regimes falling into the HEAT category might also be vulnerable to serious internal conflict. Moreover, one of the more common and serious defense contingency ‘what ifs’ involves failure of a nuclear state. Needless to say, most nuclear states also boast other sophisticated military capabilities. If the state fails, the armed forces will fail — worse atomize — as well, leaving an intervening American military with multiple violent threats ranging in intensity from the angry and dispossessed to the nuclear armed.

Thus, an alternative to ‘more of the same’ might be ‘more of the same plus’; meaning, of course, that unconventional or irregular conflicts will dominate the land force planning agenda but that the complexity and intensity of the most dangerous among these will outstrip Iraq and Afghanistan significantly. ‘More of the same plus’ witnesses U.S. land forces having to fight their way into an environment where compound traditional and irregular capabilities and forces mix in one battlespace and where a variety of threat actors compete against U.S. forces and one another at the same time. Here also the United States, as the intervening power, performs limited stabilization coincident to quite intense, decentralized combat operations.

Of course, some might see similarities between this general scenario and “hybrid war” described by Frank Hoffman and others.¹¹ But, the conditions described above also suggest that the

worst-case circumstances for U.S. forces will be those in which they conduct a unilateral, forced entry into theater; establish multiple lodgments; expand them; and then operate effectively without the benefit of either a host nation partner or a single coherent opponent following a rational strategic design. If as so often is suggested, the greatest threat to the United States is not strong functioning states but rather weak and/or failing ones, then it is reasonable to conclude that the most difficult contingency prospect for U.S. planners is ‘cold start’ intervention into a once functioning, relatively sophisticated state now suddenly crippled by internal conflict or catastrophe. In a recent Joint Force Quarterly article, Roy Goodson and Richard Schultz echoed this sentiment when they observed:

(O)ver half of the world’s approximately 195 states are weak, failing, or failed. They will generate a significant number of future conflicts. These states are vulnerable to scores of decentralized armed groups — terrorists, criminals, insurgents, and militias...De facto coalitions...comprised of states, armed groups, and other nonstate actors will exploit these conditions through violence and other means.¹²

Under the circumstances described above, there will be no single “military situation” or “enemy centers of gravity...[or] potential and most likely [enemy courses of action]” that might be applied to a unitary threat actor.¹³ Instead, there will be all the capabilities that once fit inside ‘the enemy template’ in the absence of templatable conditions or behaviors.¹⁴ The ‘enemy’ will be ‘enemies’; the demands of fighting each different in form and substance. And, as in the classical COIN environment, this will occur within and around vulnerable populations as well.

A useful thought experiment for DoD in this regard might be visualizing Iraq’s collapse under circumstances where the instrument of failure is something other than the coalition — e.g., coup, pandemic, civil war, insurrection — necessitating U.S. intervention from a cold start to both secure key populations and infrastructure and prevent horizontal escalation of the conflict region-wide. Adding presumed WMD to the scenario would be useful as well. Given the discovery learning that has been Iraq, wargaming this ‘Iraq Redux’ scenario with benefit of hindsight as to exactly how the country fractured under stress might provide defense planners with a reasonable model for exploring various other future intervention options.

Likewise, revisiting the operational conditions presented by the Yugoslav civil war might offer unique insights, if planners assume, for the sake of gaming, that compelling U.S. interests were at risk to such an extent that rapid, multi-point intervention to stop the war was unavoidable. Yet another example

might be visualizing intervention in revolutionary Iran in the late 1970s. Again, time, circumstances, and capabilities are different today. However, conditions like those present during the Iranian revolution might provide a useful analog for any number of candidate contingencies in the future. Indeed, Iran's 2009 "Green Revolution" as well as recent uprisings in Tunisia, Algeria, Yemen, and, perhaps most importantly, Egypt demonstrate the destabilizing effects of contagious (and unanticipated) civil unrest. At a minimum, land components would be well-advised to use 'cold start,' limited opposed stabilization as the centerpiece of their joint exercise program and professional military education as it combines all the complexity of COIN and stabilization with the lethality and physical danger of traditional combat operations.

On the idea of wishful thinking; in spite of rhetoric and experience to the contrary, corporate DoD still prefers preparing to fight states and their militaries, more or less under Marquis of Queensbury rules. That the QDR devoted its most sophisticated discussion to combating traditionally organized HEAT challengers while expending significantly less intellectual energy describing defense responses to next generation irregular threats is a clear indication that DoD is comfortable with linear projection of its current irregular challenge set into an indefinite future. This too suggests a dangerous precedent.

The logic seems to be that adjustments in capabilities, doctrine, and concepts sparked or spurred on by the Iraq and Afghan Wars will provide the best solutions to all (or the most important) future irregular conflicts. Alternatively, some but not all engaged in the HEAT and anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) discussions seem to argue that, because the United States over-corrected for COIN. State-based opponents in particular are now increasingly likely to engage in niche but still traditional areas of military competition where the U.S. was (and still is) dominant. Both perspectives ignore the very real possibility that military power overall might be less useful in the future as a competitive instrument vis-à-vis hostile state and non-state opponents. But, it may be the only instrument available to contain violent threats of disorder that put key strategic interests of the United States at grave risk.

The first point is especially true for HEAT challengers who might maintain just enough of the right capabilities (e.g., WMD, anti-access) to present the United States with a credible, cost-imposing foil against interference while competing more effectively in areas of increased advantage — politics, economics, etc. If this point is valid, then U.S. decision makers can assume some risk on overall land force size, while shifting the land force focus more decisively toward hedging against disorder, in-

stability, and rogue behavior occurring outside and often below responsible state authority. Though the classical view of COIN and stabilization might appear to suffice, in this regard, it does not necessarily do so at the requisite level of intensity nor does the current view of STABOPS and COIN account either for post-war political constraints or tightening resources.

Two additional points of wishful thinking are noteworthy and troublesome. First, defense strategists and planners appear to hold out great hope that foreign capacity building and security force assistance (SFA) will prevent our way out of complex irregular warfighting altogether.¹⁵ Though not explicit, this view employs some of the same arguable logic raised under the label "over-correction" above; specifically that Islamist terrorism is the principal threat to global security and that the principles of COIN will always be appropriate to the problem. It pushes that logic further by assuming that partners closest to the root of the terrorist problem share (or can be convinced of) our perspective and will in turn be willing to do something about it.

As the U.S. structures land forces hence, it would be wise to carefully weigh the risks associated with over-valuing the preventative SFA approach at the expense of building more effective contingency response capability. For example, according to Robert Haddick:

*If U.S. policymakers are hoping that foreign security forces, boosted by U.S. assistance, will always be a competent and reliable substitute for U.S. military manpower, those policymakers will frequently find themselves disappointed.*¹⁶

The second point is that regardless of how far we have come in interagency cooperation since 9/11, there is still an over-abundance of faith (or hope) within DoD that an as yet unrealized interagency expeditionary capacity will someday materialize in foreign theaters to assume responsibility for most non-military demands (again, see "over-correction"). The 2010 QDR observes, for example:

*A strong and adequately resourced cadre of civilians organized and trained to operate alongside or in lieu of U.S. military personnel during a variety of possible contingencies is an important investment for the nation's security. This is an urgent requirement for ongoing operations...and will remain an enduring need in the future security environment—both to prevent crises and to respond to them.*¹⁷

A more realistic viewpoint holds that DoD resource advantages will endure. In fact, they may become more pronounced as the United States rationalizes its balance sheet after the Iraq

and Afghan Wars. There likely is no interagency cavalry on the horizon for the foreseeable future. All budgets are certain to go down. As agencies like the DoS and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) assess needs in a resource constrained environment, large increases in cold start expeditionary capacity are not likely to survive as priorities. As in DoD, an excessive reliance on prevention is more likely to prevail. Further, the assumption that preventive capabilities dispersed around the world in capacity-building endeavors can suddenly be massed and redirected to competently contend with a single large-scale contingency is a reach. Thus, in spite of likely reductions, DoD will still boast greater raw response capacity than any other USG agency. As a consequence, minding non-military gaps will remain Defense business for some time to come.

Because of this, DoD has two enduring responsibilities. First, it must maintain the hard won capacity to employ civil-military capacity in the right combinations in operations abroad. As has been discussed, this may, however, involve a less expansive remit than that chartering the wars in either Iraq or Afghanistan. Second, and perhaps more importantly, defense and military leaders should become comfortable with their forces in the field someday answering to civilian aid, development, and homeland security officials who have requisite expert knowledge but lack sufficient human and material resources.

Finally, concerning institutional short-sightedness; the dislocating shocks of 9/11, the Iraq and Afghan insurgencies, and the politics of counter-terrorism (i.e., ‘who’s tougher on terrorists?’) tends to stifle official examination of future ground combat demands that look genetically distinct from those undertaken in the name of the WoT. The concept of “persistent conflict” has become synonymous with an era of unrelenting, manpower-intensive fights against Islamic terrorists. Defense strategy that has emerged as a result appears to tie the fate of land forces almost exclusively with persistent, WoT-related CT and COIN. Again, this is clearly a product of “over-correction” as well.

Since 9/11, substantive discussions on land force futures quickly devolve into talk on the state of COIN after Iraq and Afghanistan, the right land force contributions to CT and COIN-focused SFA, and the future of Provincial Reconstruction Teams and their integration in U.S. combat formations. Most discussions like these have not stepped out from under the shadow of Iraq and Afghanistan long-enough to answer more fundamental questions about the trajectory of unconventional conflicts and small wars in general. Again, a notable exception in this regard might be Frank Hoffman’s body of work on “Hybrid Wars.” Thus, in a period punctuated by declining defense resources, identifying the likeliest and most dangerous small wars trends

and defense responses to them will be key actions, essential to uncovering answers to the land force futures question.

Alternative Assumptions — Building the Army and Marine Corps You Can Have

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously told a U.S. soldier in Kuwait, “You go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time.”¹⁸ The soldier had asked him why deployed service members had to modify their equipment in theater to better protect against the unexpected dangers of Iraq. At the time, Rumsfeld was vilified for his insensitivity. However, he was right. Near-term choices about concepts, capabilities, force structure, etc — right or wrong — will leave an indelible mark on future readiness and operational effectiveness.

There are generally two textbook archetypes used for determining future defense demands.¹⁹ DoD looks at the present or recent past as benchmarks. Defense capabilities maintained throughout the 1990s and until 9/11 were products of the latter. With so much invested in the science of traditional warfighting and having the Gulf War as affirmation, DoD simply parsed the monolithic Soviet threat into smaller traditional regional challenges, posturing (at least rhetorically) to fight two conflicts simultaneously.

Naturally, 9/11 changed that calculus. The “two MTW” planning approach was discarded as DoD came to terms with fighting the WoT and subsequent insurgencies springing from the U.S.-triggered collapse of Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁸ COIN and comprehensive STABOPS ruled. Thus, the new defense norm — specifically for land forces — has come to be dominated by some extrapolation of present experience.

Most of us now also recognize that the post-9/11 environment encouraged defense largess. For nearly a decade, DoD has had the run of the store, choosing the type of force it wanted and experiencing almost no uncomfortable resource limitations along the way. Now, however, with light at the end of the tunnel in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the United States confronting a looming \$13 trillion dollar debt and with the Secretary of Defense already seeking to find increased “efficiencies” inside the Defense enterprise, DoD is entering a period where it now only gets the force others allow it to have and not necessarily the one it wishes for or wants.²⁰ That force will need to buy down risk in more areas with fewer resources. Indeed, DoD is caught in a vortex of expanding responsibilities — e.g., cyber and missile defense, homeland defense and security, anti-access challenges, COIN and STABOPS, CT — and flat or declining assets. It

will have to spread finite capabilities across more missions. More savings will inevitably be mined from the manpower-intensive land services as a consequence.

With these realities in mind, I propose that land force senior leaders operate off of eight new working assumptions when planning the future force. These assumptions will put them ahead of current defense thinking and posture them for inevitable changes in force size and composition.

- Defense budgets will flatten or decline. Defense missions will expand. And, active land forces will shrink.²¹
- For a variety of reasons — dwindling capabilities, national caveats, diverging interests, etc, traditional U.S. partners will assume far fewer land combat burdens.
- CT and SFA will be persistent, important, but also lower density missions than currently anticipated.
- Small wars of some description will remain the primary mission of U.S. land forces.
- Future land force size, shape, and mission should be predicated on worst case conditions: cold start, unilateral intervention, with little to no allied or host nation support.
- Smaller land forces will have less aggregate capability and less endurance but will also continue to shoulder many non-military stabilization tasks.
- Less land force capability and less partner support requires greater selectivity in employment, increased discrimination in missions, and more circumspect operational objectives.
- Newfound competency in STABOPS and COIN will inform the conduct of future operations; however, most policymakers will see classical STABOPS and COIN as cost prohibitive.

These assumptions are substantially different than those underwriting QDR's 'more of the same' outlook. Combined, they imply that serial, large-scale, long duration COIN and STABOPS — in their most classical conception — are not good archetypes for missioning and right-sizing future forces. Future U.S. land-centric operations will certainly witness irregular resistance and widespread human insecurity — the focus of COIN and STABOPS. They are equally likely to involve the decentralized employment of sophisticated military capabilities by opponents and the presence of WMD. Finally, U.S. forces are not likely to enter any future land war with the human, material, or fiscal endurance associated with Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, a new small wars intervention model is essential to answering the critical "what next for land forces?" question.

Right-Sizing Land Forces for Intervention

Strategy and plans, unconstrained by resources, will always fail to meet actual demands when they encounter reality. Defense strategy and associated capabilities are best predicated on reasonable judgments about worst-case strategic circumstances. But, response to worst-case scenarios can no longer automatically be resourced for definitive outcomes. Iraq and Afghanistan have taught us that the U.S. has likely entered a warfighting epoch where its forces sometimes leave the field when security conditions are still quite dangerous but nonetheless more manageable or containable than they were at the outset.

Sadly, the United States may be entering a period of 'supply-based' defense planning as there are simply too many potentialities and too few resources to go around. In fact, what DoD can do specifically about any future worst-case situation inevitably relies on the risk and resource trade-offs senior defense leaders make today across the whole of DoD's demand set; remember Rumsfeld's dilemma in 2004.

Prospective high-end asymmetric warfights with regional powers like China or Russia and potential North Korean, Pakistani, or Mexican collapse scenarios each fall under the worst-case rubric but for very different reasons. The latter are small wars. However, that by no means aptly describes their size, intensity, or impact. Both archetypes — 'big' and 'small' — require defense attention. In the end, however, neither is likely get the 'war winning' investment necessary to satisfy military theorists.

As noted earlier, big HEAT challenges will increasingly become the objects of dissuasion, deterrence, and, at their most intense level, coercive campaigns — certainly not regime change. Whereas, small wars of disorder need to increasingly be seen as management challenges where intervention seeks to drive active threats to levels senior decision makers find manageable. To the inevitable retort that failure to go 'all in' in any small war only guarantees U.S. forces will have to return, the best answer is "perhaps"; as the absolute cost of one, two, or more future wars like Iraq and Afghanistan become increasingly unthinkable.

For now, the twin realities of an inevitable small wars future and the certainty of flat or declining defense resources and manpower should push DoD away from a COIN-based force, optimized for serial employment in the Middle East and South Asia, and instead toward a robust, expeditionary force focused on rapid entry/punitive campaigns and limited opposed stabilization worldwide. Forcible entry, rapid force build-up, precision lethality, and immediate full spectrum effects are valued more in these two archetypes than is the capacity to extend operations

indefinitely. While the current full-spectrum mantra championed by land force leaders may in part meet some capabilities needs in these two archetypes, a fuller appreciation of the worst-case environment suggests the need for more innovation in force structure, employment concepts, and enabling capabilities. For example, as a function of the upcoming post-war reset, the force should generate more early entry combat forces and enablers that can fight and stabilize immediately on arrival with no requirement for reconfiguration or specialized reinforcement.

In brief, if one accepts the assumptions outlined above as legitimate points of departure, then GPF land forces should re-posture after Iraq and Afghanistan — not for the mission set that existed on September 10th, 2001 nor for the widespread CT, COIN, and STABOPS posture they assumed thereafter. Instead, land force leaders might consider posturing for forcible entry into and expeditionary operations in environments that are too important to ignore but also often much too big for the United States to solve outright. The worst of these circumstances include those where:

- Local authorities have lost control over outcomes and few allied or partner states are able to contribute effectively to contingency response.
- The affected population is at best indifferent and at worst openly hostile to U.S. entry.
- Intense decentralized combat action will combine with widespread human insecurity.
- An active and incoherent opposition ranges from the passively aggressive; through criminals, militias, and insurgents; to rogue elements of a sophisticated military and security apparatus.
- High-end military capabilities pose dispersed, localized challenges; in some cases, including nuclear, chemical, or biological threats.
- Partnerships are local — to the extent they exist and mostly occur at levels below the state; individual partners will also compete — sometimes violently — with one another.
- The operational challenge is so complex that U.S. forces are employed under a limited charter and with explicit or implied constraints on the course and conduct of operations.

Ideally, at max commitment, the joint Army-Marine Corps team should have the capacity to undertake two major land operations simultaneously - one of the two a large-scale limited opposed stabilization and the other a smaller rapid entry/punitive campaign. Barring involvement in a limited stabilization, the joint force should be able to conduct two somewhat larger rapid entry/punitive campaigns at once. Both missions

are founded on a renewed ability to force entry into theater at multiple points with robust force packages that can quickly create conditions suitable for the rapid build-up and distributed employment of additional follow-on forces.

The limited stabilization mission anticipates opposed, minimum essential pacification of a state, territory, or region — friendly or hostile — where central authority has failed and disorder itself threatens core U.S. interests.²² Among others, trigger events might include external attack, coup, civil war, insurgency, insurrection, and natural or human disaster. From a planning perspective, the most significant operational difference between opposed stabilization and large-scale, classical COIN and STABOPS centers on the type, intensity, and varied sources of violence, as well as the assumed absence of ready-made local partners. It is also important to note that the capacity for limited traditional military campaigns remains embedded in the force, as the armed stabilization model offered here assumes that opposing forces will often possess and employ sophisticated military capabilities and methods.

The term 'limited' is only an indication of the extent and sophistication of the objectives pursued. It is not an indication of the aggregate size of the U.S. commitment. I anticipate that a limited opposed stabilization might involve between eight and twenty combat brigade equivalents and between 90,000 and 230,000 personnel in the immediate theater of operations.²³ At max intensity, a limited stabilization is intended to achieve a circumspect set of key defeat and stabilization objectives in a high threat environment with a hostile population.²⁴

Likeliest use of the limited stabilization option is in the establishment of functional security in the most important areas of a crippled state or region. By definition then, limited stabilization is not optimized for bottom-up, long-duration nation-building but instead focuses on establishing and maintaining those minimum essential security conditions necessary for the local reconstitution of effective political authority. The mission assumes a limited duration — perhaps two years. The combat forces employed — especially early entry forces — should be drawn first from the active component. And, the force should have sufficient depth to accommodate the initial commitment of forces and a single full follow-on rotation, with options for a more extended commitment under extraordinary circumstances at significantly lower numbers.²⁵

Rapid entry/punitive campaigns are also predicated on forcible entry into and operation in high-threat environments also boasting hostile populations, albeit with a more modest U.S. land contingent.²⁶ The rapid entry/punitive campaign likely involves four to seven combat brigade equivalents and a total

personal commitment in the immediate theater of between 45,000 and 80,000 personnel.²⁷ Rapid entry campaigns also focus on achieving a limited set of very specific security objectives over a relatively short period of time (i.e., no more than 12 months). Though focused on short-duration operations, the total Army-Marine expeditionary capability should have sufficient flexibility to maintain two commitments of this type and size for up to two years (again initial commitment plus one full rotation), while maintaining the capacity to generate a third joint land force of similar size to support civil authorities in the event of wide-ranging domestic catastrophe.²⁸ This latter force does not require the warfighting potential resident in the other two but may need additional specialized capabilities to better enable it to meet its homeland defense and security demands.

In reality, the force pool available for either an opposed stabilization or a rapid entry campaign will be impacted by prior commitments. If, for example, the U.S. is committed to an opposed stabilization of 230,000, then it will by definition have significantly fewer resources available to commit to a new rapid entry requirement.

Rapid entry/punitive campaigns might be necessary to:

- Defeat hybrid military threats or hostile irregular groups;
- Neutralize violent threats to friendly governments or unimpeded use of the global commons;
- Protect U.S. citizens and property abroad;
- Establish short-term control over un-, under-, or irresponsibly-governed territory;
- Destroy or dismantle criminal or terrorist sanctuary and support networks;
- Reverse illegitimate seizures of political power;
- Underwrite the extraterritorial exercise of U.S. law; or
- Seize and exercise temporary control over WMD, critical foreign infrastructure and resources, or foreign territory that may be essential to local restoration of order, authority, and the protection of wider international security.

Yet other models for rapid entry/punitive campaigns might be Mass Atrocity Response Operations (MARO) or quick interposition between or defeat of warring factions in an internal conflict posing grave harm to key U.S. interests.²⁹ ‘Stacked’ crises necessitating the capacity for two rapid entry force packages might include direct U.S. intervention to: temper a violent succession crisis in Cuba; defeat Mexican criminal gangs; secure and safeguard North Korean or Pakistani nuclear capabilities; limit escalation of a resurgent Iraqi civil war; secure the population and key infrastructure of a state threatened by civil conflict; or defeat traditional, irregular, or hybrid threats to key lines of


communication. And, though certainly not the same from an operational perspective, one can see the need for the commitment of a third large Army and Marine force for an indefinite period to support civil authorities in domestic disaster relief as well. Note, none of these are predictive, only illustrative.

Naturally, limited opposed stabilization and rapid entry/punitive campaigns are ideal archetypes. There are obvious real world variations on each theme. Both archetypes intended to signal continued U.S. commitment to land-based power projection capability befitting a great power. But, they also account for the real limitations of a smaller land force. The STABOPS-COIN competencies are embedded in and useful to both. However, the archetypes themselves acknowledge that future demand likely will not conform to contemporary U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Purists argue for unconstrained strategy development. Invariably, the ‘unconstrained approach’ results in the strategy-resource mismatch so often decried after the fact. Successfully avoiding the strategy-resource dilemma requires a sophisticated understanding first of what actions might be essential in a given set of contingency circumstances and which might only rise to the level of ‘preferred.’ With that knowledge, the strategist then resources, plans for, and assesses risk against these minimum essential outcomes, now informed by a more refined understanding of the art of the possible.

That is the very position the land components are in today. In a 21st century context, they will be relied on for a handful of important missions. They will need the capacity to defeat high-end military forces and capabilities but likely not in the density anticipated throughout the immediate post-Cold war period. They will need to maintain and persistently improve their ability to combat multiple violent irregular opponents simultaneously, often in the face of indifferent or hostile foreign populations, and not always or even commonly on behalf of a functioning partner. They will need to know how to identify, locate, and secure key infrastructure and capabilities — including WMD — threatened by violent insecurity. They will need to maintain their new found capacity to protect vulnerable populations from criminals, terrorists, militias, and sometimes one another. They will have to forge local partnerships on the ground and raise or resurrect local formal and informal security instruments. They will have to fulfill a range of non-military missions — e.g., emergency stabilization and reconstruction, as they are still the most adaptable instruments in the nation’s con-

tingency tool kit. Finally, they will need the ability to do all of this faster as there are likely to be new unspoken restrictions on the scale and duration of future foreign contingency operations. By definition, a smaller land force will not have the capacity to take on unlimited missions. Structured and chartered correctly, however, it will be postured to succeed in those contingencies that are most important; bet on the most important being significantly different in character than today's conflicts. 

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¹ See Thom Shanker and Christopher Drew, *Pentagon Seeks Biggest Military Cuts Since Before 9/11*, *New York Times*, January 7th, 2011, p. 1; Craig Whitlock and William Brannigan, *Pentagon Faces New Budget Reality*, *The Washington Post*, January 7th, 2011, pg. 1; and Nathan Hodge and Jullian E. Barnes, *Pentagon Faces the Knife*, *Wall Street Journal*, January 7th, 2011. Recent announcements by the Secretary of Defense on proposed cuts to the defense budget included a six percent reduction in active duty Army and Marine Corps end strength.

² See United States Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual*, New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009, p. 1. I start from the traditional understanding of "small wars" as "operations undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal and external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation."

³ See Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), FM 3-07: *Stability Operations*, Washington D.C., October 2008 and HQDA, FM 3-24: *Counterinsurgency*, Washington D.C., December 2006.

⁴ See Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review*, February 2010, Available from: http://www.defense.gov/qdr/images/QDR_as_of_12Feb10_1000.pdf, Accessed: December 12th, 2010, p. 32.

⁵ See Roy Godson and Richard H. Schultz, Jr., *A QDR for all Seasons: The Pentagon is not Preparing for the Likeliest Threats*, *Small Wars Journal*, 2010, Available from: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/496-godson.pdf>, Accessed: December 11th, 2010 and Andrew R. Hoehn, et al, *A New Division of Labor: Meeting America's Security Challenges Beyond Iraq*, 2007, Available from: <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/>

pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG499.pdf, Accessed December 11th, 2010. Godson and Schultz argue that the QDR over-emphasizes future conflicts with high-end competitors like China. Like QDR, Hoehn, et al on the other hand argue that the Navy and the Air Force need to focus on and invest in a future conflict with an anti-access/area denial threat like China and pursue a lighter advise and assist approach to small wars like those encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan.

⁶ See Frederick W. Kagan and Michael O'Hanlon, *Pakistan's Collapse, Our Problem*, *The New York Times*, October 27th, 2010, Available from: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/18/opinion/18kagan.html?_r=2&ref=opinion&oref=slogin, Accessed: December 11th, 2010. Discussing a very specific contingency—collapse of Pakistan—Kagan and O'Hanlon make a good case for the high premium DoD should place on rapid, forcible entry under conditions of abject disorder.

⁷ See, for example, Christel Fonzo-Eberhard and Richard L. Kugler, Chapter 2: *Sizing the Crisis Response Capacity for Complex Operations*, in Hans Binnendijk and Patrick M. Cronin's (ed.) *Civilian Surge: Key to Complex Operations*, Center for National security Policy, National Defense University, Available from: http://www.ndu.edu/CTNSP/docUploaded/Civilian_Surge.pdf, Accessed: December 3d, 2010, p. 13. One such recommendation argued that, "By employing a multi-scenario framework, we conclude that an active/standby civilian response capacity of 5,000 personnel backed by a reserve force of 10,000 personnel makes strategic sense."

⁸ Laura A. Hall, *S/CRS 2.0: QDDR Upgrade Provides More Operating Capacity but May Not Have Eliminated All of the Bugs*, *The Will and the Wallet: Budget Insights for Foreign Affairs and Defense Policy*, Available from: <http://thewillandthewallet.org/2010/12/16/scrs-2-0-qddr-upgrade-provides-more-operating-capacity-but-may-not-have-eliminated-all-the-bugs/>, Accessed: January 10th, 2011.

⁹ See Department of Defense, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2005, Available from: <http://www.defense.gov/news/mar2005/d20050318nds1.pdf>, Accessed: January 25, 2011, p. 2. Traditional in this context means "states employing recognized military capabilities and forces in well-understood forms of military competition and conflict."

¹⁰ See Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 5.0: Joint Operational Planning*, Available from: http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp5_0.pdf, Accessed: December 3rd, 2010, p. IV-37. In joint doctrine, Phase IV is the period in operations when "the joint force may be required to perform limited local governance, inte-

grating the efforts of other supporting/contributing multinational, IGO, NGO, or USG agency participants until legitimate local entities are functioning. Phase V, on the other hand, is the period when the joint force “[enables] enable the viability of the civil authority and its provision of essential services to the largest number of people in the region.”

¹¹ See Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Arlington, VA, December 2007, Available from: http://www.potomacinsti-tute.com/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf, Accessed: December 3, 2010.

¹² Goodson and Schultz, October 2010, p. 4.

¹³ Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 5.0: Joint Operational Planning*, December 26th, 2006, Available from: http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp5_0.pdf, Accessed: November 23rd, 2010, p. III-53.

¹⁴ This refers to a period in the past when the U.S. military assumed the Soviets had a very doctrinaire or “templateable” approach to military operations where one could match on-hand capabilities and doctrine to circumstances in ways that predicted the “likeliest” and “most dangerous” enemy courses of action. Today, circumstances might be substantially different, often leaving the same or similar capabilities employed in the absence of doctrine or design.

¹⁵ See Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, July 2008, Available from: <http://www.defense.gov/news/2008%20national%20defense%20strategy.pdf>, Accessed: December 3rd, 2010, p. 8. An oft cited refrain from DoD—phrased roughly the same every time—is the following, “For these reasons, arguably the most important military component of the struggle against violent extremists is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we help prepare our partners to defend and govern themselves.

¹⁶ Robert Haddick, *The Promise and Perils of Security Force Assistance, The Will and the Wallet: Budget Insights for Foreign Affairs and Defense Policy*, Available from: <http://thewillandthewallet.org/2009/09/01/the-promise-and-perils-of-security-force-assistance/>, Accessed: December 12th, 2010.

¹⁷ Department of Defense, February 2010, p. 69.

¹⁸ Eric Schmitt, *Iraq-Bound Troops Confront Rumsfeld Over Lack of Armor*, *The New York Times*, December 8th, 2004, Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/08/international/middleeast/08cnd-rumsfeld.html>, Accessed: November 30th, 2010.

¹⁹ For a good discussion of past and current force planning methodologies, see Kathleen H. Hicks and Samuel J. Brannen, *Force Planning in the 2010 QDR*, Joint Forces Quarterly, Issue 59, Fourth Quarter 2010, Available from: http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/images/jfq-59/JFQ59_136-142_Hicks-Brannen.pdf, Accessed: December 12th, 2010.

²⁰ For a view of the fiscal environment, see Robert M. Gates, SUBJECT: Department of Defense (DoD) Efficiency Initiatives, August 16th, 2010, Available from: <https://dap.dau.mil/policy/Documents/Policy/OSD%2009637-10.pdf>, Accessed: December 6th, 2010; David R. Francis, *Commentary: Cuts to U.S. Defense Budget Look Inevitable*, *Christian Science Monitor*, June 28th, 2010, Available from: <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/David-R.-Francis/2010/0628/Cuts-to-US-defense-budget-look-inevitable>, Accessed: December 6th, 2010; and John T. Bennett, *U.S. Budget Committees to Lead Budget Attack*, *Defense News*, November 19th, 2010, Available from: <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=5077117>, Accessed: December 6th, 2010.

²¹ This seems to be a common assumption among many defense analysts and it is gaining increased visibility on Capitol Hill. See, for example, *The Sustainable Defense Task Force, Debt, Deficits, and Defense: A Way Forward*, Report of the Sustainable Defense Task Force, June 11th, 2010, pp. 18-19 and Christian Lowe, *Webb Calls for Future Troop Cuts*, *Military.com*, October 28th, 2010, Available from: <http://www.military.com/news/article/webb-calls-for-future-troop-cuts.html>, Accessed: December 6th, 2010. I would also like to acknowledge a number of conversations between himself and Dr. Maren Leed, a CSIS colleague. These conversations were critical my overall views on the subject. This view was confirmed too with the recent budget cuts announced by Secretary gates and cited at footnote number 1. Finally, commenting on a previous version of this paper, Mr. Frank Hoffman rightly observed realignment of the active and reserve components may be a route to shrinking the active force even more.

²² For an earlier description of these kinds of operations, see Nathan Freier, *The New Balance: Limited Armed Stabilization and the Future of U.S. Land Forces*, PKSOI Papers, The United States Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, Available from: <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubid=915>, Accessed: December 8th, 2010, pp. 76-77.

²³ These numbers are rough estimates based on lengthy conversations with the U.S. Army War College’s Dr. John Bonin and are based on the BCT strength plus rough strength of enablers required per BCT deployed.

²⁴ See Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3.0: Operations*, Washington D.C., February 2008, Available from: <http://downloads.army.mil/fm3-0/FM3-0.pdf>, Accessed: December 7th, 2010, pp. 6-9 to 6-11. Defeat and stability mechanisms are Army doctrinal terms for the effects U.S. forces seek to have on enemy forces with respect to the former and civilian populations with respect to the latter. "High-threat" in this context implies circumstances where some threat actors involved possess advanced military capabilities but that these capabilities are not under a single discernible chain of command and are distributed across the battlespace. Again, a good example, might be circumstances akin to those present in the Yugoslav Civil War.

²⁵ Exact duration of the rotation themselves is not part of this study.

²⁶ Again, for an earlier description of these kinds of operations, see Nathan Freier, April 2009, pp. 73-76.

²⁷ The author is again grateful to Dr. John Bonin for his assistance with numbers.

²⁸ This latter force would not have a rotation base supporting it.

²⁹ For a detailed discussion of the MARO concept, see the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy and the United States Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, *MARO/Mass Atrocity Response Operations: A Military Planning Handbook*, The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2010, Available from http://www.hks.harvard.edu/cchrp/maro/pdf/MARO_Handbook_v9.pdf, Accessed: December 7th, 2010.